



Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS Employee and Resident Issues

Hundreds of employees live and work in Yosemite National Park, El Portal, and surrounding communities. From government employees to concession staff to park partner organizations, it takes a legion of dedicated individuals to protect the park and see to its smooth operation. But how do employees and residents factor in the user capacity equation? Will they be counted alongside visitors? What about American Indian groups for whom Yosemite and the El Portal area are a part of their culture? What about homeowners who may now find their property within the Wild and Scenic River boundary in El Portal?

User Capacity: Employees and Residents

Most user capacity management programs on public lands focus strictly on visitors. But managing the movement of visitors can be a challenge, particularly in a park as vast as Yosemite. Those who come to the park move freely throughout the Merced River corridor and they engage in many different types of recreational activities. They may move easily from one activity to another, and from one location within the corridor to another. The proposed user capacity alternatives in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS evaluate several approaches to managing visitor use in the river corridor.

On the other hand, the people who live and work in the Merced River corridor move through the park in a different way. Employees typically travel to their duty station and either work from that location, or travel to areas throughout the park during the course of a work day. While staffing levels may fluctuate seasonally, the numbers of employees needed to conduct the business of Yosemite National Park tend to be relatively stable. Therefore, the user capacity measures in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan alternatives manage the numbers of employees and residents differently from visitors.

Under most of the alternatives being proposed, employee and resident numbers are addressed on a corridorwide basis. This provides park management the flexibility to reassign or relocate employee housing to best meet the operational needs of the park. The corridorwide quota allows for some growth in employee housing from existing levels, since there is currently a substantial shortage in employee housing within the river corridor. The alternative that proposed management zone quotas (Alternative 4) would result in limits on the number of employees that could be located (working or residing) in each particular zone. Most employee duty stations and housing are located in areas zoned for park administrative purposes, and these zones allow for high intensity uses. Therefore, this alternative would still allow for an increase in employees throughout the areas of the corridor zoned for this type of use.

El Portal Boundary: Employees and Residents

All of the action alternatives proposed in the revised plan meet the Court direction to reassess the boundaries based on protection of the river values in the El Portal segment. Additional data gathering was conducted in the El Portal Administrative Site and this information informed many of the decisions relating to boundary configurations and zoning scenarios.

In particular, additional research was conducted regarding areas in El Portal that were potentially eligible to the National Register as *cultural landscapes*. Cultural landscapes are special places that reveal aspects of our country's origins and development, and our relationship with the natural world. Cultural landscapes come in many forms such as gardens, scenic highways, rural communities, cemeteries, and

more. Landscape characteristics such as circulation, buildings, vegetation, and spatial organization all contribute to the significance of individual cultural landscapes.

With its winding streets, historic buildings, and views of the river, Old El Portal has the potential to be eligible for the National Register as a cultural landscape. In the late 1800s, the timber and mining industries brought the railroad to El Portal. By the turn of the century, the railroad was bringing tourists to Yosemite, with the railway terminus located in Old El Portal. This community also has been home to American Indian people for nearly 8,000 years. As a potential cultural landscape, Old El Portal has been included as part of the cultural Outstandingly Remarkable Value for the Merced River and was included within the boundaries of all of the action alternatives.

As a result, privately owned homes located on lands leased from the National Park Service in Old El Portal will now be located within the river corridor boundary. Homeowners currently receive special use permits allowing them to maintain and inhabit homes on National Park Service land. Since Old El Portal is zoned for park administrative uses in all action alternatives, continued use of this area as residences would be consistent with the management zoning prescription. Any proposed improvements or changes to homes in the river corridor, however, would need to be reviewed for consistency with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, must protect the river values in the segment, and must comply with the management elements adopted in the 2000 Merced River Plan, as amended under the Revised Merced River Plan. Since Old El Portal is proposed to be managed as a potential cultural landscape, review of any new or additional development will also consider the potential for adverse effects to the elements that contribute to the cultural Outstandingly Remarkable Value. This process has not been outlined in the plan, but would be established at a later time in collaboration with the National Park Service, park partners, homeowners, and community members.

What does this plan ultimately mean for residents and employees?

Once the Revised Merced River Plan is approved, employees and residents are unlikely to notice much change in the short term. In the long term, park management would still have the ability to reallocate employees and their housing within the corridor. Any future development of areas within the El Portal Administrative Site for administrative uses, including employee residences, will have to comply with the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and must protect and enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the segment.

Because the purpose of the Merced River Plan is to guide future management decisions in the Merced River corridor, it does not call for any specific, detailed actions. The types and locations of future administrative facilities is not the subject of this planning effort. Later in 2005, the National Park Service will initiate the El Portal Conceptual Design Plan. This implementation plan will evaluate the potential for additional administrative uses in El Portal, given the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the management elements of the Merced River Plan, as amended.

Will American Indian groups be counted in the user capacity quotas or limits?

The user capacity program does not attempt to restrict American Indians who are culturally associated with the lands in Yosemite National Park and El Portal and who access these lands to continue traditional activities for the purpose of retaining their cultural heritage. These activities are guided by federal regulations, park policies, the other elements of the Merced River Plan, and agreements between the National Park Service and the tribes. A study of traditional uses in the park is currently underway and could result in additional revisions to existing agreements. Traditional uses comprise a very small portion of the overall use in the corridor and are conducted in a manner that is protective of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values; therefore, these uses are not counted as part of the limits or quotas identified in the user capacity program alternatives.